

It has been my practice to preach from the Psalms in between other sermon series.

But as I was thinking about a series on prayer from the Heidelberg Catechism,
I noticed how easily the Lord’s Prayer connects with the Psalms.

So over the next few weeks we will be looking at the Lord’s Prayer through the Psalms.

Psalm 116 neatly sets forth the central points of Heidelberg Catechism 116-117.

116. Q. Why is prayer necessary for Christians?

A. Because prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness which God requires of us. Moreover, God will give His grace and the Holy Spirit only to those who constantly and with heartfelt longing ask Him for these gifts and thank Him for them.

117. Q. What belongs to a prayer which pleases God and is heard by Him?

A. First, we must from the heart call upon the one true God only, who has revealed Himself in His Word, for all that He has commanded us to pray. Second, we must thoroughly know our need and misery, so that we may humble ourselves before God. Third, we must rest on this firm foundation that, although we do not deserve it, God will certainly hear our prayer for the sake of Christ our Lord, as He has promised us in His Word.

The three points of question 117 neatly summarize the first half of Psalm 116 (verses 1-11), while verses 12-19 express the thankfulness called for in question 116.

So let’s start with what belongs to a prayer which pleases God.

First, we must from the heart call upon the one true God only,
who has revealed himself in his word, for all that he has commanded us to pray.

This is the first point demonstrated in Psalm 116.

Psalm 116 is not a treatise on prayer.

It is a meditation on prayer.

It is not really a prayer,

but rather a reflection on the importance of prayer.

I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy.

Because he inclined his ear to me,

therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

Why do we pray?

We pray because we love God.

I love the LORD – and why do I love my God?

Because he has loved me – he has heard my voice –

and he has shown mercy to me!

Prayer is our response to God.

Prayer presupposes that God has spoken.

And not only has God spoken,
he has also acted.

Throughout the scriptures, God's speech and God's action is bound together.

God created the heavens and the earth by the word of his power.

And he sustains all things by that same word.

With God there is no difference between word and deed.

When he speaks, he acts.

I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy.

Because he inclined his ear to me,

therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

Because God's voice is efficacious, therefore I will not give up speaking to him.

Second, we must thoroughly know our need and misery,

so that we may humble ourselves before God.

This is the central point of Psalm 116.

"The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold of me;
I suffered distress and anguish."

You often hear people say that in good times it is easy to forget God.

That is why God does not leave us long in our blithe and perilous comfort.

Death is the only path to life.

The cross is the only way to glory.

It was true for Jesus.

It is true for us.

And so it is in the midst of our suffering – in the midst of our misery –

that we cry out to God:

Then I called on the name of the LORD: 'O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!'

If you do not know your misery,

then you will not see any reason to cry out to God!

Third, we must rest on this firm foundation, that, although we do not deserve it,

God will certainly hear our prayer for the sake of Christ our Lord,

as he has promised us in his word.

Verses 5-6 of Psalm 116 show us this:

Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful.

The LORD preserves the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. (v5-6)

God is merciful.

The whole point of mercy is that it is undeserved!

In spite of our sin and rebellion,

God saved us.

He hears our prayers – not because we are so great,

but because *he* is so gracious.

Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.

For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling;

I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living. (v7-9)

This confidence in God's word and God's hearing

is contrasted with the Psalmist's profound lack of confidence in man!

I believed, even when I spoke, 'I am greatly afflicted';

I said in my alarm, 'All mankind are liars.'

Whose promises do you trust?

Whose word do you listen to?

Prayer is a response to what God has said.

If you spend much time around sports fans you can see what this means.

They have heard the words of promise:

"I will turn this team around!"

Or politicians:

"I will turn this country (or city, or state) around!"

And so the blogosphere is jammed with the prayers of the faithful,

from their hearts calling on their (false) gods

who have revealed themselves by their (empty) words

knowing their need and misery

because they haven't won a championship in years...

or this politician will make everything right...

and trusting that this time all the promises will come true.

You see, when the sports fan jumps up and down in front of a TV (or in the arena)

or when the political junkie gets fired up "for the cause"

they are praying to their gods.

But as the Psalmist points out,
“all mankind are liars.”

Only God is true.

In 1 Chronicles 1,
after God reveals his promises to David through Nathan the prophet,
declaring that God will adopt David’s son
and establish his throne forever,
David prays.

Watch for our three things:

- 1) from the heart call upon the God who has revealed himself in his word
- 2) know our need and misery so that we humble ourselves
- 3) know that God will hear for the sake of Christ

Look at how David starts:

Who am I, O LORD God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?

Having heard what God says in his word,
David responds to God’s revelation (1)
humbles himself before the LORD (2) –
already in the first verse he has already done the first two!

There is none like you, O LORD, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears. And who is like your people Israel, the one nation on earth whom God went to redeem to be his people, making for yourself a name for great and awesome things, in driving out nations before your people whom you redeemed from Egypt? And you made your people Israel to be your people forever, and you O LORD, became their God.

And now, O LORD, let the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house be established forever, and do as you have spoken, and your name will be established and magnified forever, saying ‘The LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, is Israel’s God,’ and the house of your servant David will be established before you. For you, my God, have revealed to your servant that you will build a house for him. Therefore your servant has found courage to pray before you.

And now, O LORD, you are God, and you have promised this good thing to your servant. Now you have been pleased to bless the house of your servant, that it may continue forever before you, for it is you, O LORD, who have blessed, and it is blessed forever. (1 Chronicles 17:20-27)

When you pray, remember who God is!

He is not your cosmic slot machine:

“let’s pull the prayer handle and see if God gives me what I want this time!”

Notice again what David prays for:

*Let the word that you have spoken concerning your servant
and concerning his house be established forever,
and do as you have spoken.*

How often do you pray that God would do what he has promised?

Far, far too often we spend our time praying that God would do what *we* want.

If you would be effective in your prayers, then start praying for what *he* wants!

The groundskeeper at Westminster Theological Seminary keeps a record of all the prayers that God has answered.

He was in the millions when I was in seminary.

Every day, as he went about his daily tasks, he would pray for the students,
and for the faculty, and for an ever-growing list of pastors and churches.

He would pray that Christ would bless his flock,
that pastors would preach the word faithfully,
that Christians would grow in grace and wisdom.

And every week he would add tally marks for all the sermons for which he had prayed,
all the Christians who had gone another day, another week, growing in grace.

The count went up by the hundreds daily.

Do what you have promised, O God!

Some might say,

But that's cheating!

God has already promised to do that!

What is the point of praying for what God has already promised to do?

Well, first of all, you are talking to God here.

If you cannot ask him to do what he has promised,
then there is not much that you can ask him,
because he has made so many promises!!

And even more, think about how you relate to your children:

the baby needs the food;
you have promised to give him the food;
and yet, he still has to say "please."

Will you feed him, even if he doesn't say please?

Yes – eventually!

But will he learn what he was supposed to learn?

No – you'll have to try again later.

Prayer is how God is teaching us to speak to him.

Psalm 116 then turns to how we should respond to God's mercy in hearing our prayers:
*What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me?
I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.
I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people. (v12-14)*

The language of paying vows suggests that the Psalmist had said,
"If you will deliver me, then I will offer X."
Because in verse 17, the Psalmist says that because God has loosed his bonds,
*I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call on the name of the LORD.
I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people,
in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem.
Praise the LORD!*

When you think about Jesus as the singer of this Psalm,
Psalm 116 is a celebration of the resurrection.
God has raised up Jesus,
and now Jesus stands in the courts of the house of the LORD,
in the midst of the heavenly Jerusalem,
and he gathers in the presence of all his people,
and he calls upon the name of the LORD.

So let me ask you:

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118. Q. What has God commanded us to ask of Him?

A. All the things we need for body and soul, as included in the prayer which Christ our Lord Himself taught us.

119. Q. What is the Lord's prayer?

A. Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, As we also have forgiven our debtors; And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.